DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 349 556 CS 213 502

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TITLE Neo-Sophistic Rhetorical Theory: Sophistic Precedents for Contemporary Epistemic Rhetoric.
PUB DATE 19 Mar 92
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (43rd, Cincinnati, OH, March 19-21, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Epistemology; Rhetoric; *Rhetorical Criticism; *Rhetorical Theory; *Writing (Composition)
IDENTIFIERS Burke (Kenneth); Classical Rhetoric; Gorgias of Leontini; *Rhetoric as Epistemic; *Sophists

ABSTRACT

Interest in the sophists has recently intensified among rhetorical theorists, culminating in the notion that rhetoric is epistemic. Epistemic rhetoric has its first and deepest roots in sophistic epistemological and rhetorical traditions, so that the view of rhetoric as epistemic is now being dubbed "neo-sophistic." In epistemic rhetorics, the human mind interacts dialectically with reality, and individuals interact dialectically with each other, producing knowledge. Two general approaches to sophistic doctrines have emerged recently: historical interpretation and neo-sophistic appropriation. To demonstrate the affinities between ancient sophistic epistemic rhetorics and contemporary neo-sophistic epistemic rhetorics, a close comparison of the epistemic rhetorical theories of Gorgias and Kenneth Burke is enlightening. For both Gorgias and Burke, the human mind interacts dialectically with reality through language. Also, for both, humans interact dialectically with other humans, and this social and linguistic interaction constructs knowledge. Although the rhetorics of Gorgias and Burke emerged from vastly different social, economic, and political situations, they are both epistemic in nature and share numerous similarities. Only recently have theorists begun to recognize the relatively neglected sophists as of great value to present scholarly concerns. (Eighteen references are attached.) (HB)

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Sophistic Precedents for Contemporary Epistemic Rhetoric

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Presented At:
1992 Conference on College Composition and Communication
Cincinnati, Ohio
March 19, 1992
Session A.14
Panel: Neo-Sophistic Rhetoric:
Definitions and Applications

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> For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.
>
> --Walter Benjamin

INTRODUCTION

Twenty-four hundred years after Plato entombed sophistic rhetoric in a crypt beneath the foundation(alism) of philosophical dialectic, interest in the older sophists has intensified. Sophistic doctrines are being exhumed and revived for contemporary purposes more now than ever before. Many "neo-sophistic" scholars in English and Communications departments have recognized an epistemological and methodological affinity between their own rhetorical theories and those professed by many of the older sophists, and these affinities culminate, I believe, in the conviction that rhetoric is epistemic.

Daniel Royer has recently argued that "Epistemic rhetoric is the culmination of many influences that ultimately sink their roots in the philosophies of Cassirer and Kant" (287). While Cassirer, Kant, and others have left their marks on contemporary theories of rhetoric as epistemic, Royer neglects perhaps its most profound sources of inspiration--the older sophists. In his 1967 article "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic," Robert Scott provides the first full articulation of epistemic rhetorical theory. In this landmark essay, Scott uses arguments from Toulmin, Gorgias and Protagoras to combat traditional Platonic and analytical conceptions of knowledge and truth that stifled

rhetorical theory in the early twentieth century. Also, Michael Leff in "In Search of Ariadne's Thread" derives his most extreme version of epistemic rhetoric--in which we "view epistemology as rhetorical" (82)--from Kenneth Burke and Gorgias. Epistemic rhetoric, then, has its first and deepest roots in sophistic epistemological and rhetorical traditions; and so the view that rhetoric is epistemic may accurately be termed "neo-sophistic."

Neo-sophistic rhetoric, then, has two varieties: first, epistemic rhetorics that self-consciously invoke ancient sophistic doctrines as solutions to contemporary problems; and second, epistemic rhetorics that resemble the rhetorics of the older sophists without self-consciously invoking them as predecessors. The purpose of this essay is to explore the interrelationships between ancient sophistic epistemic rhetoric and both varieties of contemporary neo-sophistic epistemic rhetoric. First I will offer a definition and discussion of epistemic rhetoric that will serve as a reference point throughout the rest of the essay. Then I will discuss several neo-sophists (who actively invoke their fifth century BCE intellectual predecessors) in relation both to ancient sophistic rhetoric and to contemporary epistemic rhetoric. Finally, in order to highlight some of the similarities between ancient sophistic and contemporary epistemic rhetorics, I will compare the epistemic rhetorical theories of Gorgias of Leontini and Kenneth Burke.

EPISTEMIC RHETORIC

Although theories of rhetoric as epistemic differ greatly in their epistemological and methodological claims, I believe that two characteristics unite these disparate theories as epistemic:

1) in epistemic rhetorics, the human mind interacts dialectically with reality, and this interaction occurs through language; and 2) in epistemic rhetorics, humans interact dialectically with other humans, and this social and linguistic interaction constructs knowledge. Not all theories of rhetoric as epistemic emphasize equally both of these characteristics.[1] The most powerful and most useful epistemic rhetorics, however, emphasize both characteristics with nearly equal force.

In "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic" Scott argues that knowledge is simultaneously and equally a linguistic construct (the result of interlocutors interacting with reality by means of language) and also a social construct (the result of interlocutors interacting with each other by means of language). A Platonic belief in the existence of truth as analytically demonstrable and prior to experience leads logically to a belief in only two modes of discourse: "a neutral presenting of data among equals and a persuasive leading of inferiors by the capable" (10). But an epistemic belief in the historical and empirical contingency of truth recovers rhetoric as a mode of thought. Rhetoric, then, creates truth through "cooperative critical inquiry" (13-14); and by reference to "generally accepted social norms, experience, or even matters of faith," rhetoric helps humans resolve "the contingencies in which [they] find themselves" (12). Scott's epistemic model of rhetoric suggests that humans interact dialectically with each other and with their material conditions, thereby creating rhetorical knowledge.

Leff supports many of Scott's conclusions. In "In Search of Ariadne's Thread," Leff identifies four senses in which rhetoric is epistemic; only the fourth (and most epistemic) concerns me

here. In this extreme view of rhetoric as epistemic, Leff points out that "knowledge itself is a rhetorical construct" (82), and he identifies two claims that are characteristic of this view: 1) "the symbolic and normative aspects of knowledge are prior to the objective and mechanical," and 2) "the rhetorical function is the dominant aspect of the symbolic process" (83). For Leff, then, linguistic and social forces operate dialectically to create knowledge.

Kenneth Bruffee's notion of collaborative learning also emphasizes the linguistic and social nature of knowledge. In "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind,'" Bruffee argues that "what we experience as reflective thought is related causally to social conversation" (639); that is, thought (or knowledge) is both socially and linguistically constructed. Bruffee explains the interconnection between thought, language, and society:

> . . . to the extent that thought is internalized conversation, any effort to understand how we think requires us to understand the nature of conversation; and any effort to understand conversation requires us to understand the nature of community life that generates and maintains conversation. Furthermore, any effort to understand and cultivate in ourselves the kind of thought we value most requires us to understand and cultivate the kinds of community life that establish and maintain conversation that is the origin of that kind of thought. (640)

Bruffee's theories of collaborative learning provide us with a powerfully epistemic view of rhetoric in which the linguistic and the social fuse into a single activity--conversation.

The desire for cooperative critical inquiry (Scott), the belief that knowledge is rhetorical (Leff), and the call for social conversation (Bruffee) are all basic principles of epistemic rhetoric, and each one incorporates the belief that knowledge is both linguistically and socially constructed. In the next section of this essay I will discuss certain neo-sophists who actively invoke their fifth century BCE intellectual ancestors, with specific reference to their theoretical relations with ancient sophistic rhetoric and contemporary epistemic rhetoric.

HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION AND NEO-SOPHISTIC APPROPRIATION

Two general approaches to sophistic doctrines have emerged during the recent revival of sophistry: historical interpretation and neo-sophistic appropriation. The historical approach concerns the recovery and interpretation of all sophistic doctrines as they were professed and received in their original economic, political, social, and cultural situations (as far as we can know them). The neo-sophistic approach, on the other hand, concerns the appropriation of certain sophistic doctrines insofar as they contribute solutions to contemporary problems. Susan Jarratt argues, for example, that the rhetorical and historiographical theories of certain older sophists can empower women and other marginalized populations within oppressive social environments. Sharon Crowley and Jasper Neel join Jarratt in the belief that the relativistic epistemologies and democratic ideologies which guided the educational theories of many of the older sophists can also guide our own attempts to politicize contemporary composition pedagogy. Finally, neo-sophists in general are concerned with how certain doctrines of the older sophists contribute to a richer conception of

contemporary epistemic rhetoric.

A few scholars in particular have captured the spirit of this movement toward neo-sophistic/epistemic rhetoric. In "A Plea for the Revival of Sophistry," Crowley argues that the rhetoric of the older sophists provides an effective alternative to stifling modern rhetorics. Modern rhetoric has been, in Crowley's words, "thoroughly technologized"; it is governed by a foundational epistemology, which results in the belief that rhetorical techniques are universally effective, regardless of their particular socio-cultural discursive context (323). The sophists, on the other hand, held a "skeptical epistemology"; and sophistic rhetorical education, Crowley argues, focused a great deal on adapting discourse for particular socio-cultural situations. The sophists' pragmatic, political concerns, combined with their skeptical epistemologies, gave rise to "the two social ingredients which make rhetoric possible and necessary: the existence of competing viewpoints, and the availability of choices among these" (328-29). Crowley's plea for a rhetoric that accounts for the real-life diversity of socio-cultural discursive contexts reveals her bias toward epistemic rhetoric, toward the social (political) and linguistic (discursive) nature of knowledge and rhetoric.

Neel values sophistry because of its relativistic epistemology (relying on belief and probability, not on truth) and its political veracity, "its ability to withstand the scrutiny of public life" (208). Sophistic rhetoric, Neel argues, distinguishes weak discourse from strong discourse, favoring the latter. Weak discourse is "untested in the arena of public life"--it offers truth, but results in silence. Strong discourse, on the other hand, exists "only in a cacophonous

plurality of other voices," encouraging opposition while maintaining consensus (208-09). Neo-sophistic rhetoric seeks to produce strong discourse, which shares many of its basic characteristics with the kind of discourse encouraged by epistemic rhetoric. Knowledge itself is generated and either maintained or lost only through language and only in the public sphere. Neel's version of neo-sophistic rhetoric, then, views knowledge as linguistically and socially constructed, and so relies on a view of rhetoric as epistemic.

Jarratt approaches the older sophists (as well as her own version of neo-sophistry) through feminist critical theory. In Rereading the Sophists, Jarratt argues that foundational metaphysics are inherently oppressive: they encourage hierarchical classifications according to race, class, and gender, always favoring one over any other (63-65). Jarratt finds the solution to the oppressive logic of foundational metaphysics in the sophistic concept nomos (social customs or conventional behavior). Nomos, according to Jarratt, "offers a mode of reading centered on narratives encoded in the text and in the times. Such an analytic provides a useful alternative to the attempt to discover marginalized voices marked by characteristic stylistic features" (75). Feminist (neo-)sophistics employs nomos and narrative to undermine the "falsely naturalized logic of patriarchy" (76) and to reread texts (literary and historical) so that voices formerly silenced by foundational metaphysics may be heard and understood. Jarratt's move from logic to narrative and from phusis (truth inscribed in nature) to nomos (truth as social construct) confirms her neo-sophistic and feminist approach to rhetorical theory as epistemic. Knowledge is structured through language, and certain linguistic structures

prevent certain social bodies from gaining access to vital knowledge. Jarratt's neo-sophistic rhetoric fights against the socially exclusionary nature of language in order to give voice to the otherwise muted and marginalized.

A number of other recent scholars have also articulated neo-sophistic/epistemic rhetorical theories similar to those advanced by Crowley, Neel, and Jarratt: Roger Moss, for example, delivers a case for sophistry that fights against the stifling effects realism has on rhetoric; John Poulakos offers his sophistic definition of rhetoric against limiting neo-Platonic and neo-Aristotelian conceptions of rhetoric; and Leff describes modern sophistic as a reaction to anti-rhetorical foundational modernism ("Modern Sophistic"). Moss, Poulakos, and Leff join the other neo-sophists in their articulations of epistemic rhetorics and in their belief that the older sophists provide solutions to a number of problems that contemporary rhetorical theory faces. In the next section of this essay, in order to demonstrate in greater detail the affinities between ancient sophistic epistemic rhetorics and contemporary neo-sophistic epistemic rhetorics (which do not self-consciously invoke their fifth century BCE Greek predecessors), I will engage in a comparison of the epistemic rhetorical theories of Gorgias and Kenneth Burke.

GORGIAS AND BURKE ON EPISTEMIC RHETORIC

Through this brief comparison, I hope to demonstrate that both Gorgias and Burke profess characteristically epistemic rhetorics, in the most powerful sense of the term. That is, both Gorgias and Burke believe that the human mind and reality interact dialectically by means of language, and also that humans construct knowledge through interacting dialectically with each

other by means of language. I choose Gorgias for this comparison because his treatments of epistemology and rhetoric are less fragmentary than other sophists'. I choose Burke to capitalize on his richly epistemic view of language as symbolic action, and also as a challenge: because of his overtly hostile attitude toward sophists, who in Burke's view, "systematically 'perfected'" the "Art of Cheating" (Rhetoric 50-51). Burke's understanding of the sophists is conditioned through a Platonic terministic screen, which deflects from Burke's consciousness the affinities between his own theories of rhetoric and those of the older sophists. This comparison of the epistemic rhetorics of Gorgias and Burke will address two "theses," each stating one of the two characteristics of epistemic rhetoric discussed above.

First Thesis: For both Gorgias and Burke, the human mind interacts dialectically with reality, and this interaction occurs through language.

In On Nature, Gorgias argues three propositions: 1) nothing exists; 2) even if things were to exist, humans couldn't know them; and 3) even if humans could know existent things, they couldn't communicate them (DK 82 B 3.65).[2] In his discussion of the second proposition, that humans can't know reality, Gorgias argues that the human mind interacts dialectically with reality, and that this interaction occurs through language, through logos.[3] According to Gorgias, reality is filtered through the senses (predominantly sight and hearing) and enters the human mind as logos. But Gorgias realizes that the logos in the human mind is not just the result of empirical observation. The human imagination creates images of things which do not exist in external reality, and yet these images may seem real to us (DK 82 B 3.77-82). Reality and imagination, therefore, interact dialectically by means of logos.

In his essays "Terministic Screens" and "Definition of Man" in Language as Symbolic Action, Burke argues for a conception of language similar to that professed by Gorgias. According to Burke, the human mind interacts dialectically with reality through terministic screens. A terministic screen is a linguistic nomenclature, and as Burke points out, "any nomenclature necessarily directs [one's] attention into some channels rather than others" ("Terministic" 45). A terministic screen is a network of language, a web of terminology. And "Even if a given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a deflection of reality" (45). Words are both "a link between us and the nonverbal" and also "by the same token a screen separating us from the nonverbal" ("Definition" 5).

Reality influences human knowledge because it is, at least partially, reflected in every terministic screen; reality helps to shape our terministic screens ("Terministic" 45). And although each of us has experienced only a "tiny sliver of reality" firsthand, reality still influences our perceptual processes ("Definition" 5). But terministic screens also select and deflect reality in the process of perception: different terministic screens direct attention differently, leading to correspondingly different qualities of observation ("Terministic" 49). Terministic screens not only direct attention; they also create mental conceptions of reality that may not correspond to the actual (and unknowable) reality that inspires the conception. Burke explains, "much that we take as observations about 'reality' may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our choice of terms" (46; see also "Definition" 5). Thus, for

Burke, reality influences the formation of terministic screens just as much as terministic screens influence the perception of reality, forming a dialectical relationship between reality and perception in the process of observation.

Second Thesis: For both Gorgias and Burke, humans interact dialectically with other humans, and this social and linguistic interaction constructs knowledge.

In his discussion of the third proposition in On Nature, that humans cannot communicate reality, Gorgias argues that humans interact dialectically with other humans, and that this social and linguistic interaction constructs knowledge. When we perceive, we turn realities into logos, and when we communicate with other human beings, we communicate only logos, not the realities themselves (DK 82 B 3.83-85). But while realities themselves are not communicable, logos is. Gorgias writes, "What is visible is comprehended by one organ [the eyes], logos by another [the ears]" (Kennedy DK 82 B 3.86). Logos, then, may be communicated from one person to another, but it must undergo the same distortion in sensory perception that any external reality, whether only visible or only audible, must undergo. Thus, the logos that we may attempt to communicate is not the same logos our interlocutors produce in their own minds.

Although logos, for Gorgias, is specific to each individual, a certain degree of harmony is possible at the level of opinion and in the arena of the discourse community. When reality is subject to distortion in the human perceptual processes, pure knowledge (in a Platonic sense) becomes impossible, and opinion becomes everything. And while Platonic knowledge (based on the discovery of universal forms) cannot be socially constructed, opinion, on the other hand, derives its very significance through social construction. Certain intellectual forums, certain

discourse communities, according to Gorgias, construct opinions by means of logos. In The Encomium of Helen, Gorgias writes:

> To understand that persuasion, when added to speech, is wont also to impress the soul as it wishes, one must study: first, the words of astronomers who, substituting opinion for opinion, taking away one but creating another, make what is incredible and unclear seem true to the eyes of opinion; then, second, logically necessary debates in which a single speech, written with art but not spoken with truth, bends a great crowd and persuades; <and> third, the verbal disputes of philosophers in which the swiftness of thought is also shown making the belief in an opinion subject to easy change. (Kennedy DK 82 B 11.13)

The language produced by astronomers, politicians, and philosophers works to replace accepted opinions with new theories, new opinions. And these new opinions become "common knowledge," at least for a while, until they are replaced with new theories and opinions. Knowledge, then, or more accurately opinion, is socially constructed through dialectical and linguistic interaction within discourse communities.

In his essay "Terministic Screens," Burke argues for a conception of knowledge similar to that professed by Gorgias. According to Burke, humans interact dialectically with other humans, and this social and linguistic interaction constructs knowledge. Burke acknowledges that no two terministic screens will be exactly alike, that each individual understands reality differently by way of unique terministic screens (52). However, Burke does not submit to a purely individualized skepticism; such a view of language would, of course, exclude any cultural

influence on knowledge. Rather, Burke is careful to point out that terministic screens (and the knowledge that results from observation through them) are stabilized by cultural forces. According to Burke, "The human animal, as we know it, emerges into personality by first mastering whatever tribal speech happens to be its particular symbolic environment" (53). In Burkean terms, then, terministic screens and thus knowledge itself are linguistically and socially constructed in the dialectical interaction of human beings within certain cultural boundaries.

Although the rhetorics professed by Gorgias and Burke arose from vastly different economic, political, social and cultural situations, both rhetorics are epistemic in nature. By viewing these epistemic rhetorics in close proximity, we see in detail their intimate similarities, both enriching our conceptions of ancient sophistic epistemic rhetoric and also enriching our conceptions of contemporary theories of rhetoric as epistemic

CONCLUSION

I would like to conclude by returning to the passage from Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" which began this essay as an epigraph: "For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably" (256). It has been the argument throughout this essay that the image of the sophistic movement has only recently been "recognized by the present as one of its own concerns." This new concern with the rhetorical doctrines of the older sophists is, I believe, a result of the recent movement back to epistemic rhetoric, a notion of rhetoric first taught by the sophists in fifth century BCE Greece.

Epistemic epistemologies, conceiving of knowledge as rhetorical (both linguistic and social), view the historian as a sophist. Epistemic historiography seeks diverse voices with which to converse dialectically, and through which to construct knowledge. And in theories of rhetoric as epistemic, studies in the history of rhetoric participate in the social and linguistic construction of epistemic discourse communities. While several contemporary epistemic scholars of rhetoric have looked to a variety of figures and texts in the history of rhetoric with an eye toward enriching their own contemporary conceptions of rhetoric, the sophists have been relatively neglected. Given the epistemological affinities between many of the older sophists and contemporary neo-sophists, it is clear that these epistemic rhetoric teachers of the fifth century BCE can contribute much to our own understanding of rhetoric as epistemic.

Notes

[1] Kenneth Dowst's work on epistemic rhetoric, for example, argues that language mediates between reality and the human mind to create knowledge; Dowst does not, however, see knowledge as socially constructed. In his essay "The Epistemic Approach," Dowst articulates a theory of rhetoric as epistemic that emphasizes that humans understand reality through language. According to Dowst, writers compose their worlds; that is, language "comes between the writer's self and objective reality, modifying the former as it gives shape to the latter" (68). This epistemic approach to rhetoric, according to Dowst, is characterized by three central and closely related propositions: first, "we do not know the world immediately; rather, we compose our knowledge by composing language"; second, "how we can act depends on what we know, hence on the language with which we make sense of the world"; and third, "serious experimenting in composing with words is experimenting in knowing in new ways, perhaps better ways" (70). Although Dowst's rhetoric is indeed epistemic, it lacks the empowering sense that knowledge is a social construct.

[2] This and all subsequent references to the Gorgian fragments will be documented intratextually using the section numbers in Diels and Kranz. Quotes from Kennedy's translation in Sprague's The Older Sophists will be indicated parenthetically.

[3] It is important to note that the very term logos in ancient Greece had an epistemic sense. In The Sophistic Movement, G. B. Kerferd explains that logos simultaneously implied three ideas: first, "language and linguistic formulation, hence, speech, discourse, description"; second,

"thought and mental processes, hence thinking, reasoning, accounting for"; and third, "the world, that about which we are able to speak and to think, hence structural principles, formulae, natural laws and so on." And, Kerferd continues, "While in any one context the word logos may seem to point primarily or exclusively to only one of these areas [language, thought, and reality], the underlying meaning usually, perhaps always, involves some degree of reference to the other two areas as well . . . (83-84).

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